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BULGARIAN-BYZANTINE MARITAL DIPLOMACY FROM 1185 TO 1280

SASHKA GEORGIEVA/SOFIA

Marriages like specific means of diplomacy were very popular in the Middle Ages. They interwove with kinship ties the parties that got into alliances and were considered a secure way of strengthening political agreements. During the seven centuries of the existence of mediaeval Bulgaria political marriages, betrothals and unsuccessful marital negotiations exceeded fifty. The huge majority of them served foreign policy purposes. Affinal kinship ties connected different Bulgarian rulers or other representatives of the Bulgarian aristocracy with all the countries and nations with which Bulgaria had important political relations: Byzantium, Serbia, Hungary, The Latin Empire of Constantinople, Wallachia, the Pechenegs, the Tatars, and the Turks. Nearly half of all known political marriages and projects of marriages were part of the relations between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire.

Bulgaria was not the only country where Byzantium found husbands for its princesses. Legitimate and illegitimate emperor's daughters, sisters, nieces and cousins were given as wives to rulers or simply nobles all over Europe and even in Asia.¹ It is a paradox that a great majority of those marriages were contracted at variance with the ideological system, proclaimed and asserted in Byzantium. According to the asseverations of the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus there was "a dread and authentic charge and ordinance of the great and holy Constantine . . . that never shall an emperor of the Romans ally himself in marriage with a nation of customs differing from and alien to those of the Roman order, especially with one that is infidel and unbaptized, unless it be with the Franks, for they alone were excepted by that great man, the holy Constantine, . . . Because of the traditional fame and nobility of those lands and races."² The Byzantine ideological doctrine about the nobility of the races³ distinguished them according to the antiquity of their culture and their relations with Rome and Constantinople. Building up the Orthodox commonwealth, Byzantium managed to assert among number of nations in Europe the idea about

¹ R. KERBL, *Byzantinische Princessinen in Ungarn zwischen 1050–1200 und ihr Einfluss auf das Arpadenkö nigreich*, Wien 1979; M. MACLAGAN, A Byzantine Princess in Portugal, in *Studies in Memory of David T. Rice*, Edinburgh 1975, 284–293; М. ЛАСКАРИС, *Византиске принцезе у средновековној Србији*, Београд 1926; R. MACRIDES, Dynastic marriages and political kinship, in *Byzantine diplomacy*, ed. J. SHEPARD–S. FRANKLIN, Aldershot 1992, 263–280; S. GEORGIEVA, The Byzantine Princesses in Bulgaria, *BBg* 9 (1995) 163–201.

² Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. G. MORAVCSIC–R. JENKINS. Budapest 1949, 71–72 (English translation: R. MACRIDES, Dynastic marriages and political kinship, 266–267).

³ H. ARWEILER, *L'idéologie politique de l'empire byzantine*, Paris 1975, 50–51; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики (893–927). Златният век на средновековна България*, София 1983, 24.

the superiority of the Romans, about the unattainability and the sanctity of their emperor who was at the top of the hierarchical pyramid of the rulers.⁴ During the first five or six centuries of the existence of Byzantium rarely if not hardly ever were there cases of foreign rulers who attempted to use the means of marital diplomacy to change the established order in the universe. Such attempt was made though by the Bulgarian tsar Simeon the Great (893–927).⁵ His ambitions amazed the then Patriarch of Constantinople who thought they were impossible and unrealizable.⁶ During that epoch despite the temporary hegemony of the Bulgarian state under the rule of the tsar Symeon, the Empire was still at the height of its power.⁷ In the early eleventh century it tried to wipe out the Bulgarian Tsardom and for a little over a century and a half it really managed to. However, in 1185 Bulgaria arose from the ashes.

During the first decades after the re-establishment of the Bulgarian state its relations with Byzantium were dictated by the brute strength of the sword. The new rulers of the Second Bulgarian Tsardom: the brothers Asen (1190–1195) and Petar (1185–1197), and later Kaloyan (1197–1207), had to fight first to gain the authority of independent rulers, for at the beginning Byzantium considered them just rebels who had raised arms against the sovereign power of the Emperor. In the period up to 1202 the Bulgarians did not need lasting peace with Byzantium, as it would have prevented them from liberating and uniting all Bulgarian lands under the rule of Asens.⁸ And in the next several years the events that shattered the myth about the “eternal Empire”,⁹ shattered also the idea about the hierarchy of the rulers. New opportunities for essential changes in the hierarchical ladder were opened now and any ambitious and strong enough actor on the political stage could take advantage of them. In 1205 the knights of the Fourth Crusade did it and as a result for several decades Byzantium was replaced by a new empire – the Latin Empire of Constantinople. It was not by chance that in the early 1220s, under the rule of the tsar Boril (1207–1218), Bulgarian marital diplomacy was orientated towards the west knights settled on the Balkan Peninsula and the Hungarians.

⁴ F. DÖLGER, „Die Familie der Könige“, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 60 [*Festschrift R. V. Heckel*] (1940) 397–420; ИДЕМ, Средновековното семейство на народите и българския владетел, *СнБАН* 16/32 (1943) 181–221; G. OSTROGORSKY, Byzantine emperor and the Hierarchical World Order, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 84 (1956) 1–14.

⁵ М. ДРИНОВ, Южные славяне и Византия, в *Избрани съчинения* 1, София 1971, 447; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики (893–927)*, 108–109, 111–117.

⁶ Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople, *Letters*, Greek text and English translation by R. JENKINS–L. WESTERINK, Washington 1973, 122, 128.

⁷ The marital diplomacy between Byzantium and Bulgaria from the 7th to the early 11th century is examined by С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, Българо-византийската брачна дипломатия по време на Първото българско царство, *ИИПр* 5–6 (2012) (forthcoming).

⁸ И. БОЖИЛОВ–В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на средновековна България VII–XIV век*, София 1999, 434.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 441.

In the meantime in Nicaea and Epirus two new foundations were building up power, each of them with its hopes and aspirations to impose its influence in Constantinople and re-establish the Byzantine Empire. The processes in Nicaea had started in as early as 1205 when Theodore I Laskaris was proclaimed Byzantine emperor. However, Theodore Komnenos Doukas (1215–1230) who took power in the Epirote state in 1215 made up the delay comparatively quickly by consolidating his rule, expanding his territories and in 1227 he was crowned emperor. Thus, on the Balkan Peninsula, four empires took shape, all intertwined in a colossal conflict of interests directed towards Constantinople and the majesty of the former Byzantine empire.¹⁰ None of the rulers of those four states could solely rely on his own efforts; therefore the more active of them had to look for an ally, if they wanted to improve their chances of success. Ivan II Asen (1218–1241), who ascended to the throne in Bulgaria in 1218, was not particularly active at first. He preferred initially to watch the events around Constantinople without taking any actions himself.¹¹ He was probably waiting for someone of the three claimants to the Byzantine imperial inheritance to ask him for support. Theodore Komnenos, the ruler of the Epirote state, was the first to do it. In the middle of 1220s he offered Ivan II Asen to become allied and the latter accepted. Their alliance was cemented with a marriage¹² between the despot Manuel Komnenos, Emperor Theodore's brother, and Maria¹³, a daughter of the Bulgarian ruler from his first wife Anna.¹⁴ Contracted on the initiative of Epirus, that marriage definitely benefited the Romans, if not by securing the Bulgarians' military support, at least by securing their neutrality in case Theodore should come into collision with the Latin Empire or Nicaea. It is more difficult to explain why the Bulgarian ruler agreed to that alliance, which prevented him from fighting for the lands inhabited with Bulgarians included in the territory ruled by the emperor of Thessaloniki. Did he hope to enter Constantinople with the help of the Epirotes and then turn against them and defeat them thus consolidating under his scepter not only all age-old Bulgarian lands, but also the lands of the whole Byzantine commonwealth? This seems too ambitious a plan even for a politician, strategist and warrior of such high class as Ivan II Asen. Most probably he accepted the offer for alliance with Epirus in order to stop the Epirotes' further expansion into lands populated with Bulgarians.¹⁵

Whatever Ivan Asen's plans were, they could hardly have included lasting alliance with Epirus, as this would have been at variance with the policy of the previous

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 479–481.

¹¹ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци (1186–1460). Генеалогия и просопография*, София 1985, 78.

¹² Georgius Akropolites, *Opera* 1, rec. A. HEIZENBERG, Lipsiae 1903, 41.

¹³ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 100–101.

¹⁴ S. GEORGIEVA, Anna, called Anisia – facts and interpretations, *BHR* 3/4 (2012) (in the press).

¹⁵ *История на България* 3, София 1982, 165.

generation of the Asens aimed at the liberation and consolidation of all the Bulgarian lands. It would have been contrary to Ivan II Asen's own policy from the decade following the late 1220s. Quite soon after he had sent his daughter Maria to Thessaloniki in pledge of the good relationship with Theodore Komnenos, the Bulgarian ruler responded to an offer for negotiations that came from one of the Epirus's enemies – the barons from Constantinople. They were desperately looking for a patron for the underage emperor Baldwin II (1228–1261), who came to power in 1228 after the death of his brother Robert of Courtenay (1221–1228). The barons and the Bulgarian ruler discussed the idea eleven-year-old Baldwin II to marry Ivan II Asen's daughter. During the negotiations, however, the barons found a more appropriate father-in-law for the underage emperor in the person of John of Brienne, titular king of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The idea to connect the Latin imperial court in Constantinople and Ivan II Asen with kinship ties was not realized but the Bulgarian ruler seemed to have greeted it favorably, which occasioned the wrath of Theodore Komnenos or at least this is one possible explanation of the surprising twist in the policy of the Emperor of Thessaloniki. In the early spring of 1230 he led his army against Bulgaria. So much for the safety of the arrangements cemented by marriage! Neither the Bulgarian, nor the Epirote ruler thought of the fact that they were relatives when they took a political course contrary to the agreement they had signed together. And how did that affect the life of the Bulgarian princess, sent to the foreign imperial court as the wife of the emperor's brother? In fact, there is no evidence for a change in her status. She went on living with Manuel Komnenos, and after Theodore Komnenos' defeat at Klokotnitsa thanks to her, her husband settled in Thessaloniki, where he ruled undisturbed by the Bulgarians, "because he was [Ivan] Asen's daughter's husband"¹⁶ and because he paid off for the patronage of the Bulgarian tsar with loyalty.

The despot of Thessaloniki enjoyed his father-in-law's protection for seven years. However, in 1237 Ivan II Asen married Manuel's niece Irina¹⁷, who was living as a captive in Turnovo together with her father the ex-emperor Theodore Komnenos. From that moment on the Bulgarian ruler stood for his new father-in-law's interests. He gave Theodore his support, which was to destroy his daughter's marriage, but that was obviously not a serious enough reason for him to make him find other ways to please his new wife and her father. Ivan Asen's support gave wings to Theodore Komnenos, who launched an offensive against his brother Manuel and took Thessaloniki. Manuel was exiled while Maria was sent back to Turnovo.¹⁸ Apparently, her marriage had fully exhausted its political potential and neither of the two parties which had insisted on its contraction needed it anymore. And the direct participants in that marriage were not asked for their opinion neither before the wedding, nor about the

¹⁶ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 43–44.

¹⁷ S. GEORGIEVA, *The Byzantine Princesses in Bulgaria*, 170–175.

¹⁸ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 101.

divorce.

Maria was not the only Ivan Asen's daughter, used in his marital diplomacy. The fate of her half-sister Elena, born during her father's second marriage – to the Hungarian princess Anna (Maria), was subject to the gusts of the political winds on the Balkans, too. Scholars relate her name to Ivan Asen's hopes to arrange kinship ties with the Latin imperial family in Constantinople in 1228 when Elena was only four years old. The sources, unfortunately, do not allow us to flatly refer this episode of the Bulgarian ruler's marital policy to Elena's life¹⁹, what is more, this issue does not belong to the topic of the current research. However, an inseparable part of it is Ivan Asen's next move concerning his marital diplomacy with the Romans, in this case with the Nicaeans led by the emperor John III Doukas Vatatzes (1221–1254): he sent the princess Elena, who was engaged to John III's son when she was in her ninth year of age²⁰, to Nicaea to become the wife of the future emperor Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258). The wedding was performed in 1235 in the town of Lampsakos and it marked the successful end of the four-year long diplomatic efforts of the royal fathers of the bride and the groom. Their negotiations led to the recovery of the Bulgarian Patriarchate (the official act of the promotion of the archbishop of Turnovo to the rank of an autocephalous patriarch accompanied the solemn celebration of Elena and Theodore's wedding) and to a political and military alliance between Bulgaria and Nicaea against the Latin Empire.²¹ It is difficult to say a creation of whose marital diplomacy Elena and Theodore's marriage was. Akropolites and Gregoras run counter each other when they mention who initiated the negotiations and offered the interdynastic marriage.²² However, it is an undeniable fact that both parties benefited from it, and that the two of them conducted the negotiations as equal partners. At first glance it seems there is inequality in the fact that a Bulgarian princess was given as a pledge for the engagements Ivan II Asen had entered into and was sent to Nicaea. However, in this case we cannot define the girl as a hostage exactly because of the equality of the partners who contracted the alliance. As the later development of the events showed Ivan Asen did not consider Elena's presence in the Nicaean court as an obstacle in case he decided to change the direction of his political course. And that happened quite soon after the patriarch Germanos officiated at Elena and The-

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 102, n. 4.

²⁰ According to Dimiter Angelov's well-grounded opinion when defining people's age Akropolites uses a method of inclusive counting, i.e. by saying that Elena was in her ninth year he means that she was still eight and was getting on for nine, which means that at the time of her engagement she was eight. See. D. G. ANGELOV, Theodore II Laskaris, Elena Asenina and Bulgaria, in *Средновековният българин и „другите“*. Сборник в чест на 60-годишнината на проф. дин Петър Ангелов, София 2013, 276–277.

²¹ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 82–83, И. БОЖИЛОВ–В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История*, 491–493.

²² Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 48–49; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina historia* 1, ed. L. SCHOPENUS, Bonnae 1829, 29.

odore's wedding. Two years later, misled by the hope to come closer to the throne in Constantinople with the help of arranged kinship ties, Ivan Asen jockeyed Elena out of her husband's home or rather out of her mother-in-law's home and broke his relations with John III Doukas Vatatzes in order to enter into an alliance with the Latins²³, who had been left without an emperor after the death of John of Brienne in March 1237. In the same time the Bulgarian tsar started negotiations with the Pope too.²⁴

It is interesting to note that when Ivan Asen tore his daughter away from her new family, he did not do it because he was afraid for her life or of any violation against her, but because he wanted to have a marriageable princess ready to hand, whom he could use for another marital alliance.²⁵ This sounds a bit illogical if we bear in mind that Elena had a sister called Tamara, who might have been even a little older than Elena²⁶ and who was said to have been still unmarried some ten years later²⁷. However, for a ruler who so actively used the means of marital diplomacy every royal daughter would be a highly valued bargaining chip, which had to be utilized in the most rational way. Moreover, Elena was still a child and she could yet serve her father in arranging other kinship ties with foreign rulers that would seem more perspective from political point of view. Indicative of the tactics of the medieval rulers who had realized the potential of marital diplomacy is the way the Byzantine emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) used his daughter Maria to settle his political problems: in the period from 1163 to 1179 the emperor negotiated with four different rulers, offering them his daughter for their wife.²⁸ It is evident that Ivan Asen's actions concerning Elena's future family life is anything but unusual. However, in contrast to the Bulgarian tsar, Manuel I Komnenos only had one marriageable daughter²⁹. For unknown reasons Ivan Asen apparently considered Elena more appropriate than Tamara for the purposes of his marital diplomacy and therefore wanted to have Elena by his side in case his new allies came round to get related to the Bulgarian royal house.

The Bulgarians and the Latins had just made an alliance and even though they

²³ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 52–53, 55.

²⁴ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 83–84.

²⁵ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 52–53.

²⁶ *Борислов Синодик*, издание и превод И. БОЖИЛОВ–А. ТОТОМАНОВА–И. БИЛЯРСКИ, София 2010, 161, 326, 12–13, И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 104.

²⁷ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 94.

²⁸ L. GARLAND–A. STONE, Maria Porphyrogenita, daughter of Manuel I Comnenus, in *De Imperatoribus Romanis*, an online encyclopedia of Roman Emperors, updated 2006 (<http://www.roman-emperors.org/maryp.htm>); R. MACRIDES, Dynastic marriages and political kinship, 268.

²⁹ He had a second daughter too but she died when she was four years old. See. L. GARLAND–A. STONE, Bertha-Irene of Sulzbach, first wife of Manuel I Comnenus, Maria Porphyrogenita, daughter of Manuel I Comnenus, in *De Imperatoribus Romanis*, an online encyclopedia of Roman Emperors, updated 2005 (<http://www.roman-emperors.org/bertha.htm>).

had not solidified it with marriage they immediately launched an offence against Nicaea. However, Ivan Asen's new political course was even more transient. It did not last to witness the end of the first joint actions whose aim was to seize the town of Tzouroulos.³⁰ Now, however, the sources explain the sudden change of mind not with the Bulgarian ruler's inconsistency, but with interference from above – a Judgment on him: a disease burst forth in Turnovo and it took to the grave the Queen, one of the royal children and the head of the Bulgarian church. Today's Bulgarian scholars tend to neglect the religious feelings as an explanation for the political decisions of the ruler and look for the reasons that occasioned the new radical turn in Ivan Asen's political course in the futility of his negotiations with the Pope and the Latins.³¹ If the reason had been political, what would have been the profit the Bulgarian tsar was expecting to achieve? It is stated in some research that Ivan Asen renounced his alliance with the Latins because he did not receive what he wanted. But what could the alliance with John III Doukas Vatatzes give him? The same alliance that just several months earlier had started to fill the tsar with doubts and even had seemed useless to him.³² It did not bring any political dividends for the Bulgarian tsardom and actually "helped, practically, the establishment of the Nicaeans on the Balkan Peninsula".³³ Ivan Asen was clever enough to notice that, moreover, he himself contributed to that effect with his passiveness after 1237, exactly after that "insignificant" episode with the epidemic, which broke out in Turnovo. The described development of the events gives additional weight to Akropolites' words and entitles us to consider it possible that a medieval ruler could see the tragic events befallen on him as God's chastisement for breaking the oaths given before God.

Whatever the reasons, the tsar renewed the union with the emperor John III Doukas Vatatzes and brought Elena back to her lawful though underage husband, Theodore Laskaris³⁴. The two grew up together brought up by the empress Irene and in time made family and gave birth to six children of which only the last one was a boy – the future emperor John IV (1258–1261), born at Christmas 1250. Four letters, written by the deeply grieved emperor Theodore II Laskaris between 1252 and 1254³⁵ testify to the fact that Elena Asenina died quite untimely – not yet thirty. Her death is dated in the period 1st September 1251 – 31st August 1252.³⁶ From politi-

³⁰ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 55–56.

³¹ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 84, п. 73; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История*, 495.

³² И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 83.

³³ *Ibidem*, 86.

³⁴ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 56–57, 60.

³⁵ Theodori Ducae Lascaris *Epistulae CCXVII*, ed. N. FESTA, Florence, 1898, ep. 57, 58, 59, 60; About the dating of the letters see. D. G. ANGELOV, Theodore II Laskaris, Elena Asenina and Bulgaria, 280–281.

³⁶ This dating is based on the analysis of D. Angelov. The scholar thinks that the date of Elena's death can be defined even more precisely and states that most probably she died in the sum-

cal point of view her marriage fulfilled its purpose on the very day of the wedding when the Bulgarian Church was granted its ecclesiastical autonomy. In the long run Bulgarian marital diplomacy can be praised that Elena was an empress as the wife of a co-emperor³⁷. However, her presence in the imperial court does not seem to have influenced the relations between the two countries. Even though Elena Asenina managed to inflame strong and lasting love for her in Theodore II's heart³⁸, she did not succeed in creating positive attitude towards the Bulgarians³⁹.

But let us go back to 1237, when little Elena was sent back to the court of the Laskarides. Having expiated his sin by recovering his union with Nicaea, Ivan II Asen soon committed a new "sin", but this time he did it breaching canon laws whose authority could hardly be compared with the influence of a drama seen as a God's punishment. Rulers often disregarded church laws, predominantly marital prohibitions concerning the number of marriages and prohibited degrees of kinship. Ivan Asen ignored them too, when soon after the death of his second wife Anna (Maria) he married Irina, daughter of the ex-emperor of Thessaloniki Theodore Komnenos. This was a third marriage for the tsar, and the Church denied legality of such marriages.⁴⁰ Apart from this the newly-married were related within the forbidden degrees of affinal kinship as Irina was Manuel Komnenos' niece, and he was Ivan Asen's son-in-law.⁴¹ This marriage is part of the history of Bulgarian-Byzantine dynastic relations, because though captive Irina Komnena was none the less a Byzantine princess, and her father though also captive, blind at that (he was blinded on the order of Ivan II Asen after an unsuccessful attempt at conspiracy), had sufficient influence to affect the political development on the Balkans. Not accidentally the first thing the new father-in-law of the Bulgarian tsar did was to retake Thessaloniki from his brother Manuel Komnenos with the hope that one day if not he himself one of his sons would sit on the throne in Constantinople. But can we find political reasons for the second chance of Theodore Komnenos to become related with Ivan Asen? A number of researchers give a positive answer to this question, following the axiom that inter-dynastic marriages normally had political purposes.⁴² The ex-emperor of Thessaloniki

mer of 1252, but the statement is not argued cogently enough: D. G. ANGELOV, *Theodore II Laskaris, Elena Asenina and Bulgaria*, 281.

³⁷ According to Macrides Theodore II was proclaimed co-emperor on the day of his engagement to Elena, which Macrides dates in 1234: R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites: The History. Introduction, translation and commentary*, Oxford 2007, 39.

³⁸ Eloquent testimony to the feelings Theodore II had for Elena is one of his writings, published recently in Bulgaria: see. D. G. ANGELOV, *Theodore II Laskaris, Elena Asenina and Bulgaria*, 294–296.

³⁹ D. G. ANGELOV, *Theodore II Laskaris, Elena Asenina and Bulgaria*, 282 sq.

⁴⁰ E. KALUŽNIACKI, *Werke des Patriarchen von Bulgarien Euthimius (1375–1393)*, Wien 1901, 240–251.

⁴¹ Akropolites makes sure to mention this fact: Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 60.

⁴² В. Н. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на българската държава през Средните векове 3*, София 1940,

undoubtedly had serious political motives to give his consent to that marriage. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that he contributed in any way to its contraction. In that case decisive for Irina's fate were not her father's aspirations but those of the Bulgarian tsar because at that time Theodore Komnenos was not an influential figure in the political situation on the Balkans. According to some scholars Theodore Komnenos' actions in Thessaloniki objectively benefited the Bulgarian Tsardom as they breathed new life to the rivalry between Epirus and Nicaea.⁴³ However, according to other researchers the Bulgarian ruler's marriage to Irina and his support for Theodore Komnenos deprived the Tsardom from the opportunity to control Thessaloniki.⁴⁴ But even if we agree with the first statement, Ivan Asen could hardly have seriously relied on the blind ex-emperor and his inexperienced sons to cause substantial difficulties to Nicaea. And even if he had relied on them he did not have to necessarily marry Irina, he could have simply supported her father's long nourished dream. In my opinion the political activity of the tsar's father-in-law in Thessaloniki is a consequence of Ivan Asen's marriage to the Byzantine princess rather than a reason for it. All these considerations cast doubt on the hypothesis that Ivan II Asen contracted his marriage to Irina in view of the state interest. Additional support to this conclusion can be found in Akropolites' words. According to the chronicler Asen "loved his wife Eirene exceedingly, no less than Antony did Cleopatra"⁴⁵ The Byzantine writer does not make similar commentaries for each royal couple and his words are completely in harmony with the idea that the reasons for this dynastic marriage were not political. Therefore, it could be excluded of the purposive Bulgarian-Byzantine marital diplomacy.

Following the chronological sequence of the data in the primary sources we reach to a piece of evidence which for the first time in the history of interdynastic kinship ties between Bulgaria and Byzantium introduces the name of Michael Palaiologos, who would turn the political marriage into one of the main instruments of intervention in the affairs of the neighbouring tsardom. But that would happen later, when Michael Palaiologos, led by his ambitions, would manage to overcome all obstacles and become emperor. The evidence mentioned above only hints on those ambitions, which would unfold in full force some ten years later. It takes us to the troubled decade after Ivan II Asen's death, which was followed by the successions of two underage rulers. The Byzantine noble Michael was still at the beginning of his career as a military and politician and in 1246, soon after the death of the Bulgarian tsar Kaliman I (1241–1246), he was appointed by John Doukas Vatatzes to govern the region of Melnik and Serres newly conquered by the Empire of Nicaea. After some time a rumor reached the emperor that Michael Palaiologos had contrived a plot to enter into alliance with the Bulgarians and solidify it by marrying Tamara, "sister of Ka-

406; И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Цар Асен II*, София 1942, 35.

⁴³ И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Цар Асен II*, София 1942, 35.

⁴⁴ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 86.

⁴⁵ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 61; Bulgarian translation: *ГИБИ* 8 (1972) 170.

liman the Bulgarian ruler, . . . she was still unwed”.⁴⁶ Or at least that was how a conversation between two Romans, living in Melnik, was interpreted. The conversation was reported to Nicholas Manglavites, who obviously spotted something wrong in the fact that a person who just had a command in the region should negotiate with a foreign country unbeknownst to the emperor. The basileus himself did not pay attention to the report at first, since it was not the time for inquiry but for campaign and battle and he postponed the case until a suitable hour. However, in 1253 he took the necessary measures. He set up a court, appointed judges and assembled a tribunal to investigate the accusation. The inhabitant of Melnik who had mentioned Michael’s marriage to Tamara was interrogated and even tortured. The man, though, constantly asserted that those had been his words and Michael Komnenos knew nothing at all about it. The court decided that the defendant had been slandered without reason.⁴⁷ However, the emperor of Nicaea was not completely reassured. He tried to bind Michael more tightly to the interests of the Laskarides’ dynasty by marrying him to his grant-niece Theodora, granddaughter of his brother Isaak Doukas. And then he transferred his son-in-law to a post in Asia Minor.

Thus the project of marriage between the descendant of Byzantine emperors and the Bulgarian princess Tamara proves to be just an unconfirmed rumor. Still, if we take into consideration that even after Michael Palaiologos was cleared of charges of treason he was still held in suspicion and if we have in mind Michael’s later activities which reveal boundless ambition and his bent for achieving political goals through marriages it is probably worthy to speculate on the contingent possibility John Vatatzes’ court to have taken the wrong decision and Michael Palaiologos to have really entered into secret negotiations with the Bulgarians. First we have to assess when this could have happened. The only thing we know for sure is that the negotiations were held after Michael Palaiologos took the post in Melnik and Serres region, i.e. after the region was included within the boundaries of the Empire of Nicaea, which happened immediately after Kaliman I’s death. The trial and Michael’s acquittal is dated in the autumn of 1253⁴⁸, and his wedding – in the winter of 1253/1254.⁴⁹ This is a period of about seven years. It is difficult to say how much time passed between Michael’s conversations with the Bulgarians and the appearance of the rumor about them in Melnik; how long it took for the said rumor to reach Vatatzes’ ears and how long the Emperor postponed the investigation.⁵⁰ The rumor appeared immediately after the death of Demetrios Tornikes Komnenos and before the death of the *megeas domestikos* Andronikos Palaiologos. Both woeful events happened in the period after

⁴⁶ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 94.

⁴⁷ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 94–97.

⁴⁸ R. GUILLAND, Le Grand connétable, in *Recherches sur les Institutions Byzantines* 1, Berlin 1967, 472.

⁴⁹ R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 263, 272, n. 1.

⁵⁰ I. Bozhilov dates the rumour about the possible marriage between Tamara and Michael Palaiologos in the period 1252–1254. See. И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 104.

1248 and before 1252. They cannot be dated with greater precision,⁵¹ and even if they could this would not help us define the time when the eventual conversation could have taken place. Tamara's labeling as "sister of Kaliman the Bulgarian ruler", and not as, for example, step-sister of Mihail, the Bulgarian ruler or daughter of Ivan Asen, who was far more renowned than Kaliman, seems to suggest that if there had been any secret talks, they might have been carried on either soon after Kaliman's death or with opponents of Mihail II Asen's regency who used Kaliman's name as a flag and were trying to impose their influence in the court by supporting his sister's ascension to the throne. But is it possible for the Bulgarians to accept an offer like Michael's in a period of change of power when a marriage with Tamara would give the Byzantine aristocrat grounds to claim the throne in Turnovo and all Bulgarian lands? This is either a plan of someone who perceived what was desirable as possible, or the event was caused by the idle words of some person, said in front of the wrong interlocutor and thus turned into reason for trial against Michael Palaiologos. The second version was proved by the court, appointed to investigate the case. The conclusion is that most probably Michael Palaiologos did not negotiate to marry Tamara Asenina.

There is one more hypothesis which rejects the reality of that marital project but on different grounds.⁵² That hypothesis is based on a comparative analysis of Akropolites' and Pachymeres' historical writings and more specifically on the two historians' versions about the trial of 1253. Michael Palaiologos was accused of possible marriage alliance with an enemy of the emperor of Nicaea John III Doukas Vatatses. Unlike Akropolites though Pachymeres states that Michael tried to enter into alliance not with the Bulgarians but with the ruler of Epiros Michael II Komnenos (1230–1266/68) and marry his daughter not Tamara.⁵³ The deep comparative analysis reaches the conclusion that Akropolites' aim was to exalt the image of Michael Palaiologos, the future emperor Michael VIII (1259–1282), by embellishing his deeds on the one hand, and defaming the characters and behavior of John III Vatatses and his son Theodore II Laskaris, on the other. As a whole the analysis impresses with its cogency. However, this does not seem to refer to the arguments explaining why Akropolites substituted the ruler of Epiros Michael II – the supposed actual partner who Michael Palaiologos wanted to enter into alliance with – with the Bulgarian ruler: He did it because he could not afford to admit that Michael Palaiologos conspired with the greatest enemy of Nicaea, i.e. with the ruler of Epiros.⁵⁴ In my opinion any plot whoever it is formed with is always treason. The only way the reputation of the accused in treason to be kept unblemished is to prove that the accusation is unsubstantiated, which Akropolites does brilliantly. To put it another way, he did not need to distort history to achieve his goal. That is the reason why I tend to

⁵¹ R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 255, n. 20, 264, n. 8.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 72–73.

⁵³ Georgios Pachymeres, *De Michaelae et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 37.

⁵⁴ R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites*, 73.

agree with the researchers who found Akropolites' version more convincing.⁵⁵

Michael Palaiologos' star as a major figure in Bulgarian-Byzantine marital diplomacy was yet to rise, but the events in Bulgaria and Nicaea were setting the best conditions for that. The murder of Mihail II Asen in the middle of 1256 laid the beginnings of strenuous struggle for the throne in Turnovo. It created chaos in the succession to the throne as the regicide Kaliman II (1256) could not reign for long and was assassinated himself and neither Mihail II Asen, nor his cousin Kaliman II left an heir to the throne.⁵⁶ Thus at the top of the hierarchy in Turnovo Mitso⁵⁷ appeared – a person whose only connection with the ruling dynasty was his wife, a daughter of Ivan II Asen but it was enough to make him a legitimate ruler.⁵⁸ That precedent revealed to Mitso's adversaries the way they could oppose him – it was enough to marry their claimant Konstantine Tih (1257–1277) to a descendant of Asens' dynasty “so that he might appear to govern by inheritance”⁵⁹. The boyar group opened negotiations with the emperor of Nicaea Theodore II Laskaris and asked him to marry his oldest daughter Eirene, who was also Ivan II Asen's granddaughter, to Konstantine. Thus, for the first time the Bulgarian-Byzantine marital diplomacy was used not only to ask for or promise political support but also to solve succession problems in Bulgaria. That was due to the establishment of the authority of Asens' dynasty and the legitimism in the Tsardom, and also to the marital policy of Ivan II Asen, which led to the penetration of Asens into the Byzantine imperial court.

The aim of the Bulgarians who initiated the conversations with Theodore Laskaris is clearly outlined in the sources but what were the political motives that made the emperor of Nicaea choose that very claimant to the Bulgarian throne? Whether to legitimize his reign or to ensure the support of Rostislav Mihailovich and his army, Kaliman II married Mihail II Asen's widow who was Rostislav's daughter.⁶⁰ This way he declared political orientation directed to the west – to Hungary, as Rostislav Mi-

⁵⁵ A. FAILLER, Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère, *REB* 38 (1980) 11–12; GEANAKOPLOS, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the west*, Cambridge, Mass. 1959, 21–6.

⁵⁶ И. БОЖИЛОВ–В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История*, 508–509.

⁵⁷ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 111.

⁵⁸ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis Libri tredecim* I, rec. I. BEKKERUS, Bonnae 1835, I, 349; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina Historia* I, Bonnae 1829, 60; Й. ЮРКОВА–В. ПЕНЧЕВ, *Български средновековни монети и печати*, София 1990, 176–178; К. ДОЧЕВ, *Монети и парично обращение в Търново XII–XIV век*, Велико Търново 1992, 76–78; С. ДИМОВА, Сякъ ли е монети цар Мицо Асен в Месемврия?, *Проблеми на изкуството* 1 (2004) 56–58; И. СОТИРОВ, Монетосеченето на Мичо (Миче) – „Симеона цара” и събитията в България през 1256–1263 г., *НСЕ* 1 (2004) 117–136; Н. МИТЕВ, Още веднъж за монетосеченето на Мичо Асен, *Историкии* 4 [Изследвания в чест на проф. дин Иван Карайотов по случай неговата 70-годишнина] (2011) 207–211.

⁵⁹ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 152.

⁶⁰ С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, Дъщерята на Ростислав Михайлович и събитията в България от средата на XIII в., *ИПр* 2 (1989) 52–57.

hailovich was son-in-law of the Hungarian king Bela IV and ruled the Hungarian banate of Macso (Machva). So Nicaea could not rely on Kaliman II as an ally. Mitso, who was not even mentioned by Akropolites, was probably considered too insignificant as a political figure. Obviously Theodore II Laskaris decided that Konstantin Tih had the most reliable support and greatest chances to keep the crown, therefore, he willingly took advantage of the opportunity to ensure him as an ally. It seems the emperor laid great hopes to use this marriage alliance to influence the policy of the Tsardom and to monitor the frame of mind in Turnovo. Otherwise he would not have agreed to give his firstborn daughter in marriage to Konstantin. He did not hesitate to do it even when he learned that his future son-in-law had a wife. In fact, that was not considered an impediment by any of the parties. Konstantin was divorced and his first spouse was sent to Nicaea.⁶¹

The wedding of Konstantin Tih and Irina Laskarina cannot be dated precisely. The available evidence refer the event to the period 1257–1258 and the main question is whether it happened before August 1258, when the emperor Theodore II died or shortly afterwards. According to Akropolites the peaceful relations between Bulgaria and Nicaea, solidified with the marriage of the firstborn Nicaean princess, were arranged before Theodore got ill and died.⁶² Pachymeres, however, states that Irina was sent to Turnovo by John⁶³, meaning John IV Laskaris. But if we carefully compare the evidence of the two Byzantine writers we can infer that they do not contradict but rather complement each other. Akropolites' evidence refers to the moment of negotiations and the contraction of the Bulgarian-Nicaean agreement, when the emperor was undoubtedly still alive. He was still alive at the time when the Bulgarians fulfilled their first engagement: to get Konstantin Tih divorced and send his ex-wife to Nicaea. It is logical that this event preceded Irina's arrival in Turnovo. But stricken by his serious illness the emperor Theodore II Laskaris could not take part in the farewell ceremonies.

That marriage served its main purpose by giving Konstantin Tih grounds to take the name of Asen and reign with the confidence of a legitimate ruler. However, in the long run it seems to have benefited neither Bulgaria, nor its southern neighbor due to the forcible change of power in the Empire. The Laskarides probably would have achieved the expected friendly relations with Bulgaria thanks to Irina Laskarina sitting on the throne in Turnovo, but Michael Palaiologos the usurper could not hope for friendliness after blinding and dethroning Irina's brother John IV in December 1261. Since then the new emperor made the Bulgarian tsaritsa his sworn enemy. He antagonized her husband Konstantin Tih, too, by supporting Mitso – Konstantin's principal rivalry for the throne. That support is associated with the first indisputable act of Michael VIII in the sphere of Bulgarian-Byzantine marital diplomacy. When

⁶¹ Georgius Akropolites, *Opera*, 152.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 155.

⁶³ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 349.

the emperor included Mitso's lands and the town of Messambria within the boundaries of his empire he promised to become related to Mitso by marrying his daughter to Mitso's firstborn son Ivan.⁶⁴ At that time Ivan was seven or eight years old.⁶⁵ That project of marriage increased Mitso's confidence that as an emigrant he would enjoy the benevolence of the emperor in the future. It also provided Mitso's son the opportunity to claim the power in Bulgaria someday relying on the support of the Empire. And Michael Palaiologos on his part could someday use this powerful trump-card to impose his own protégé on the throne in Turnovo. However, this was impossible while power remained firmly in the hands of Konstantin Tih Asen.

Still in the early 1260s, consciously or not, Michael Palaiologos planted yet another "apple of discord" in the Tsardom by marrying one of the still unmarried sisters of John IV Laskaris to Yakov Svetoslav. According to Pachymeres Michael Palaiologos used the marriages of the three Laskarides princesses only to solve internal political problems – he wanted to remove the descendants of Theodore II Laskaris from the imperial court, because they could be rightful rivals for the monarchy Michael VIII craved for.⁶⁶ For that reason in 1261 in his capacity of co-emperor and guardian of the emperor John IV Michael VIII hastily married the three princesses. As far as we can judge by his choice of grooms⁶⁷ he not only tried to send the girls far away from Byzantium by finding them foreigners for husbands but he also chose men whose political positions would not allow them to become dangerous rivals to Michael VIII in case they tried to use their kinship with the Laskarides against Michael. In modern historiography there is a suggestion that when the emperor arranged the marriage with Yakov Svetoslav he probably hoped to ensure the friendship of one of the most eminent Bulgarian boyars.⁶⁸ We have no grounds to believe that Pachymeres would not have known or would have preferred to pass it over in silence if behind that marriage there had been any plans regarding foreign affairs.⁶⁹ The historian never mentioned a case when Michael Palaiologos relied on Yakov Svetoslav during all the period of re-establishing Byzantium – time full of dangerous moments for the emperor. The only argument which could corroborate the suggestion that Mi-

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 350.

⁶⁵ Ivan's mother was a daughter of Ivan II Asen and Irina Komnena and therefore was born between 1238 and 1242. She could have her first children when she was about thirteen years old, i.e. between 1251 and 1255. And the cession of Messambria and the emigration of Mitso's family into the territories of the Empire is dated in 1260 (see. И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеновци*, 111), which means that at that time Mitso's firstborn son was between his fifth and his ninth year of age.

⁶⁶ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 180.

⁶⁷ About them see. A. FAILLER, *Chronologie et composition dans l'Histoire de Georges Pachymère*, 68–72; П. НИКОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения от 1257 до 1277 година, СбБАН* 11/7 (1920) 114–115.

⁶⁸ П. НИКОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения*, 130.

⁶⁹ S. GEORGIEVA, *The Byzantine Princesses in Bulgaria*, 196.

chael Palaiologos intentionally used a Byzantine princess and a descendant of the Asens as future means of destabilizing the Tsardom is found in the fact that in the late 1260s the Russian prince Yakov Svetoslav decked himself with the title of “*imperator Bulgarorum*”⁷⁰. The tsaritsa Irina died around that time, and she was the only connection between Konstantin Tih and the Asens, which helped him to sit firmly on the Bulgarian throne. After Irina’s death anyone else connected with the Asens’ dynasty one way or another could claim the crown. Yakov Svetoslav’s claims created certain tension in the Tsardom in the early 1270s but had it been foreseen some ten years earlier when Michael Palaiologos decided to marry Elena Asenina’s daughter to the Russian prince in Moesia? There is no conclusive answer to that question. In my opinion at the time when that marriage was arranged the Russian was too insignificant to play any important role in the plans of the emperor. Therefore, it is more logical to suggest that the reason why Yakov Svetoslav and the other two husbands were chosen for the three princesses of the Laskarides was the only one mentioned by Pachymeres: the emperor wanted to get rid of John IV’s sisters. This is a rare case when Byzantine princesses were exported so that the emperor could solve internal policy problems.

That way or another, when in 1268 the tsaritsa Irina died, the Byzantine emperor could not rely on Yakov Svetoslav because at that time the ruler of Vidin was in alliance with the Hungarians. The emperor had to choose another opportunity to improve his positions in Bulgaria. Konstantine Asen was available for a new interdynastic marriage and Michael VIII offered unhesitatingly to join the two ruling dynasties in Turnovo and Constantinople with kinship ties.⁷¹ The emperor suggested that the Bulgarian tsar marry Maria Palaiologena⁷², the emperor’s niece, daughter of his sister Eirene (nun Eulogia). The reasons behind that diplomatic move have long been an issue of analyses and deductions.⁷³ Most researchers think that it was occasioned by the ambitions of Charles of Anjou, the king of Naples (1266–1285), to re-establish the Latin Empire with the help of an anti-Byzantine coalition. Its foundations were laid in 1267 with the contract of Viterbo, signed by Charles of Anjou and the Latin emperor in exile Balduin II.⁷⁴ The Hungarians joined the alliance and Charles relied

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 197, n. 319.

⁷¹ The date of Irina’s death and that of Konstantin Tih’s third marriage which followed soon after he became a widower cannot be determined precisely, but the prevailing opinion is that the two events happened between 1268 and 1269. See И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици*, 116 and n. 25, 26.

⁷² S. GEORGIEVA, *The Byzantine Princesses in Bulgaria*, 180–185.

⁷³ В. Н. ЗАТАРСКИ, *История* 3, 520–523; П. ПЕТРОВ, Към въпроса за българо-византийските отношения през втората половина на XIII в., *ИИПр* 1 (1960), 83–91.

⁷⁴ В. Н. ЗАТАРСКИ, *История* 3, 520–521; A. FAILLER, *Chronologie et composition dans l’Histoire de Georges Pachymères*, II, *REB* 39 (1981) 214–215; X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения през Средновековието*, София 1998, 174.

on them to attract the Serbians and the Bulgarians into the coalition.⁷⁵ In 1268 the Serbians entered into an alliance with the Hungarians and their union was solidified with the marriage of Katarina, daughter of Stefan V (1270–1272), and Stefan Dragutin, the firstborn son of the king of Serbia Stefan Uroš I (1243–1276). In the same 1268, there was a Bulgarian embassy in the Hungarian court, too.⁷⁶ Most scholars think that those Bulgarians were sent there by Konstantine Tih. However, there is another opinion which is not groundless. It states that for the period between 1266 and 1272 the Bulgarians mentioned in the Hungarian charters were connected with Yakov Svetoslav, whom the Hungarian kings Béla IV (1235–1270) and Stefan V officially recognized as *imperator Bulgarorum*.⁷⁷ No matter whether those envoys were sent by Yakov Svetoslav or by Konstantin Tih, it is a fact that the anti-Byzantine coalition organized by Charles of Anjou was reaching out for the closest neighbours of the Empire and it was a matter of time for Byzantium to remain completely isolated on the Balkan Peninsula. That occasioned Michael VIII Palaiologos to look for an agreement with Konstantin Tih in order to stop the expansion of the coalition. Byzantium was so hard pressed that the emperor felt compelled not only to offer his niece for a wife of the Bulgarian ruler but also to promise the cession of Messambria and Anhialo as a dowery of the future bride.⁷⁸

For Konstantin Tih this was a good opportunity to take back the coastal towns without bloodshed. Thus, in Turnovo yet another Byzantine princess came bringing for yet another time the hope of establishing good neighbourly relations with the Empire and even of territorial acquisitions. However, soon it was about to turn out for yet another time that an interdynastic marriage could not be a guarantee for the fulfillment of the political engagements undertaken. Michael VIII Palaiologos prolonged the act of ceding Messambria and Anhialo. Most probably he never intended to give up those towns. His reluctance to keep his commitment laid the beginning of a serious conflict with his niece, the Bulgarian tsaritsa.⁷⁹ The emperor chose to keep the Black Sea towns rather than keep his good relations with Turnovo. By making Konstantin and Maria his enemies Michael VIII was once again forced to face the danger to see Bulgaria involved into the anti-Byzantine coalition led by Charles of Anjou.⁸⁰ In order to deter Bulgaria from undertaking any anti-Byzantine actions

⁷⁵ J. FINE, *The late medieval Balkans. A critical survey from the sixth to the late twelfth century*, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1983, 203; X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения*, 174.

⁷⁶ *Codex diplomaticus patrius Hungaricus VIII*, szerk. I. NAGY, Budapest 1891, 76, 96–97.

⁷⁷ X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения*, 174.

⁷⁸ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaelē et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 342–343.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 343–344, 427.

⁸⁰ About the connection between Bulgaria and the attempts of Charles of Anjou to organize anti-Byzantine coalition see: В. Н. ЗАТАРСКИ, *История* 3, 524–525; I. DUJČEV, Carlo I d'Angio, gli Slavi meridionali e il consiglio di Lione del 1274, in *Studi in memoria di P. Adiuto Putigani*, Bari 1975, 111–125; Й. АНДРЕЕВ, Отношенията между България и неаполитанското кралство през втората половина на XIII в., *ИИПр* 4 (1978) 59–74; И. БОЖИЛОВ–В.

Michael VIII Palaiologos once again resorted to the means of marital diplomacy but this time he used them to enter into an alliance with two potential enemies of the Tsardom. First, he allied with the Tatar khan Nogay and gave him for a wife his illegitimate daughter Euphrosyne⁸¹. Then he gained over the Hungarian king Stefan V by arranging a marriage between his son and co-emperor Andronicus II Palaiologos and Stefan V's daughter Anna.⁸² To eliminate the danger from the west Michael VIII signed a union between the Greek and Latin Church in 1274. That was most of all a political act, which, however, was inevitably connected with religion. Lots of people in Byzantium thought it was a betrayal against the faith and reacted sharply and by that drew the emperor's anger upon themselves. Nun Eulogia, the Bulgarian tsaritsa's mother, was among those people.⁸³ Thus, Michael's Uniate policy affected not only Maria's religious feelings but her filial affection, as well, and deepened still further her hatred for him, impelling her to unequal duel with him.⁸⁴

Unable to derive any more benefits from Konstantin Tih's third marriage and pressed hard by the events happening in Bulgaria in 1270s, the Byzantine emperor was forced to look for new ways to help him influence the policy of the Tsardom. At that time a new figure appeared on the political scene. It was the leader of the popular insurrection Ivaylo. Thanks to his victories against the Tatars, who were invading the Bulgarian territories, he started gaining authority at the expense of Konstantin (all the more that after a leg injury the tsar had lost his ability to move freely which made many people despise him⁸⁵). That inevitably led to a battle between the royal army and the rebellions. The disabled ruler lost not only the battle, but his life as well.⁸⁶ The turmoil and Konstantin's death created perfect conditions for Michael VIII to intervene in the inner affairs of the Tsardom. Impressed by Ivaylo's victories and his growing popularity, the Byzantine emperor brooded over the possibility to marry him to his daughter because he assessed that the rebel would be dangerous as a rival⁸⁷, but valuable as an ally. Therefore he sent people to collect "information about the barbarian" and find out whether he was "worthy to rule"⁸⁸. The careful investigation, however, made the emperor think about uncertainty of fate and about the transience of its gifts, when they were received by a person who did not have the necessary virtue

ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История*, 517. There is also an opinion that Bulgaria under the reign of Konstantin Tih cannot be associated with that coalition. See. X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения*, 174–175.

⁸¹ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 344; Г. ОСТРОГОРСКИ, *Историја Византије*, Београд 1969, 430.

⁸² Г. ОСТРОГОРСКИ, *Историја Византије*, 428.

⁸³ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 427.

⁸⁴ S. GEORGIEVA, *The Byzantine Princesses in Bulgaria*, 182.

⁸⁵ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 233.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 434; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina historia* 1, 131.

⁸⁷ Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina historia* 1, 131–132.

⁸⁸ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 435.

to keep them. Judged by Pachymeres' words by "virtue" (ἀρετῆς) the emperor meant mainly the person's high descent. It turned out that when choosing a future groom for the princess the emperor considered the lineage a more important criterion than military prowess, bravery and popularity in the state. Ivaylo had all those advantages and nobody could deny it but nevertheless Michael VIII Palaiologos chose to marry his daughter to Mitso's son Ivan, because as a descendant of the Asens he had a legitimate claim to the throne in Turnovo. Thus, after more than fifteen years the emperor fulfilled his promise to give his firstborn daughter Eirene as a wife of Mitso's son. After the wedding Michael VIII proclaimed Ivan Tsar of the Bulgarians and gave him "his grandfather's name – Asen"⁸⁹, and he promised to support Ivan's claims to the Bulgarian crown with Byzantine troops. Ivan on his part promised to always be an ally to the Empire should he become the ruler of Bulgaria.⁹⁰

During that turmoil in Bulgaria apart from the two possibilities for intervention analyzed above Michael VIII had one more alternative – to improve his relations with his niece Maria and use her to impose his influence in the Tsardom. The discord and mistrust between the two, though, made it impossible to even think of collaboration. On the contrary, the emperor only considered Maria as an impediment to his plans. That is why, when the tsaritsa, pressed by the armies of Ivaylo, on the one hand, and by the Byzantine troops, supporting the pretender Ivan Asen, on the other, appealed to her uncle for help, her plea was rejected. Michael VIII was already carrying out the new move of his marital diplomacy and there was no room for Maria in it. The Empire could not rely on her because she had wholeheartedly given herself up to her role as Bulgarian tsaritsa and mother of the underage tsar Mihail. After the emperor's rebuff Maria was forced to look for an agreement with Ivaylo. He turned out to be more accommodating. As a result, in 1278, a few months after the death of her husband, the tsaritsa married his murderer. That marriage, unequal and humiliating for her descend, is quite telling for the strength of her ambition to keep the power to herself and to her son – an ambition which had already made the boyars in Turnovo hate her. Driven by their hatred and lured by the generous promises of the emperor, the boyars waited for the convenient moment and gave Maria, pregnant with Ivaylo's child, together with her son from Konstantin Tih to Michael VIII. Then they accepted the emperor's son-in-law as Tsar Ivan III Asen (1279–1280).⁹¹

Everything went according to the plan of the Byzantine basileus, but he wanted to strengthen the position of his protégé by providing him support from the influential aristocrats in Bulgaria. At that time in Turnovo there was a person notable for his popularity and authority. It was the strategus Georgy Terter, who did not conceal his ambitions for power. Michael Palaiologos decided to use them and offer him the title of despot. With such a powerful political figure, however, one could not only rely on

⁸⁹ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 435.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 435–436.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 436, 446–447; Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina historia*, 1,132; И. БОЖИЛОВ–В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История*, 517–518.

his promotion in the hierarchy. According to Georgius Pachymeres this would only create striving for even greater power⁹². Therefore, the Byzantine emperor insisted that Terter should get the title of despot only if he became related to the tsar Ivan III Asen. Terter was married but that was not an insurmountable obstacle. Just like Konstantin Tih's first marriage, Terter's wedlock was dissolved and the events followed the known pattern: Terter's ex-wife together with her son Theodore Svetoslav was sent "under escort to Nicaea"⁹³. After that Terter married Ivan III Asen's sister, Maria. Although this marriage arranged a kinship tie between a Bulgarian boyar and the Bulgarian tsar and was used as a means to solve inner political problems, Pachymeres clearly states that it was the result of the Byzantine marital diplomacy and more precisely Michael VIII's diplomacy, and it was part of his plans to impose his influence in the Tsardom.

Georgy Terter's actions, however, show that the faith which medieval diplomats had in the reliability of kinship ties as a guarantee for loyalty and fulfillment of engagements was illusive. Hidden behind his kinship with the new tsar, the despot secretly hatched a plot against his brother-in-law, aiming at the crown. Ivaylo's successes against the Byzantine troops which had to protect Ivan III Asen left Michael Palaiologos' protégé without support. The situation being as it was, Mitso's son chose not to take the risk of blindly trusting to his kinship with unruly Terter and decided to give up the crown. Less than a year after the ascension of Ivan III Asen and Irina to the throne, they robbed whatever they could from the royal treasure, ran away from Bulgaria and settled in Byzantium, contenting themselves with the title of despot. And the throne in Turnovo was occupied by Georgy I Terter (1280–1292).

At the end let us try to sum it up. During the investigated period of the history of the relations between Bulgaria and Byzantium two rulers appeared on the political scene both of them ranking among the statesmen who used most actively the means of marital diplomacy: the Bulgarian tsar Ivan II Asen and the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, whose career as a matchmaker continued out of the chronological frame of the present research.⁹⁴ Six of the total eight Bulgarian-Byzantine marriages, contracted between 1186 and 1280, are a work of those two rulers. Three of the matches are connected with the name of Ivan II Asen, one of them being realized on the initiative of the ruler of Epirus Theodore Komnenos. One was contracted on the initiative of a group of Bulgarian boyars who asked Theodore II Laskaris to give his firstborn daughter for a wife of Konstantin Tih to make him part of the Asens' dynasty and to legitimize his power. The remaining four marriages were conceived by Michael VIII Palaiologos. Obviously, in terms of number, marriages, contracted on the initiative of the Romans slightly outnumber those conceived by Bulgarians.

⁹² Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis* 1, 437.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 437.

⁹⁴ The topic will be continued in another study dedicated to the marital diplomacy between Byzantium and Bulgaria under the reign of the Terters and the Shishman branch of the Asen dynasty.

Following this quantitative analyses, individually Michael VIII Palaiologos has some advantage over Ivan II Asen. Ivan Asen married two of his daughters – one for a despot, the other one for a crown prince and co-emperor; and he himself married a Byzantine princess, which raised her to the rank of Bulgarian tsaritsa. Three of the four princesses, married by Michael VIII Palaiologos in the Bulgarian lands, became tsaritsas in Turnovo, and the fourth one had the title of empress of the Bulgarians thanks to her husband Yakov Svetoslav, whose imperial title though was only recognized by the Hungarians. Quantitative indices are indeed one of the criteria by which one can assess the success of someone's strategy. However, it should not be forgotten that the number of the conceived marriages was limited by the number of the princesses a ruler had at his disposal.

Ivan Asen did not offer to the Byzantines any relatives other than his daughters. Indeed he had from his first two marriages four girls⁹⁵, who were marriageable as far as their age was concerned. However, one of them, Tamara, for unknown reasons was not used for Ivan Asen's marital policy. The Bulgarian tsar married off his eldest daughter in Epirus by giving his consent to a marriage contracted on the initiative of the emperor of Thessaloniki Theodore Komnenos. At first sight that marriage contravened the interests of the Tsardom. However, in 1230 things turned round: Ivan Asen imposed his hegemony over the lands of the captured Theodore Komnenos. Nevertheless, the tsar kept his daughter's marriage to Manuel, Theodore's brother, because he could use him to promote his influence in Thessaloniki. That marriage served its purpose up to 1237 and did not give an occasion to Ivan Asen to dissolve it, so that he could use again the princess to solidify other political arrangements. His other daughter from his first marriage, whose name is not known, the Bulgarian tsar gave for a wife to the Serbian ruler Stefan Vladislav (1234–1243), and she shared the royal honours with Stefan until 1243. Therefore, for his marital diplomacy regarding Nicaea, which managed to re-establish Byzantium in 1261, the Bulgarian tsar could only use one of his daughters – Elena. And he also tried to use her to arrange his relations with the barons in Constantinople. By contrast, Michael VIII Palaiologos had at his disposal plenty of young ladies of highest rank. He generously married off someone else's imperial daughters: such as the three princesses, sisters of the under-age basileus John IV Laskaris, two of whom were married in the Bulgarian lands. He also ventured to offer his niece's hand in marriage to Konstantin Tih and his offer was accepted.⁹⁶ And in order to ensure support for his protégé Ivan III Asen the emperor even determined the marital status of a Bulgarian princess – sister of the tsar imposed in Turnovo with the help of Byzantium.

There are other criteria which have to be analyzed to judge how successful a marital diplomacy was. They include the aims that a ruler pursued by conceiving the mar-

⁹⁵ His two daughters from Irina Komnena, born after 1237, could not get old enough so that their father could include them in his marital diplomacy before he died in 1242.

⁹⁶ Another niece of Michael Palaiologos became wife of Smilets, who ruled Bulgaria from 1292 to 1298, but this marriage will be analyzed in another article.

riages; the answer to the question whether those aims were achieved or not, and how important and lasting the achievements were. The marriages realized by Ivan II Asen were long-lasting and gained the purpose pursued. Through Maria's marriage the Bulgarian tsar kept imposing his influence in Thessaloniki for seven years and could rely on the loyalty of his son-in-law Manuel Komnenos. However, love intervened in policy: Ivan Asen married the daughter of the ex-emperor of Thessaloniki, Theodore, and allowed his new father-in-law to take Manuel's role. The marriage of underage Elena Asenina and Theodore II Laskaris solidified an agreement that led to the achievement of an aim, which was extremely important for the Tsardom: the restoration of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. This marriage fulfilled its purpose on the very wedding day of the newly married when imperial and synodal decree proclaimed the bishop of Turnovo an independent patriarch. Preserving Elena's marriage and the alliance with Nicaea was even at variance with the interests of Bulgaria. That is why two years after the wedding the Tsar tried to dissolve it and get his daughter out of Nicaea. However, his plan failed because of unfavorable concurrence of circumstances thought in the Middle Ages to be God's chastisement for broken oaths. Thus, albeit against Ivan II Asen's strategy and tactics and without any benefit for the Tsardom that marriage existed until Elena Asenina's death.

Now let us see what kind of purposes Michael VIII Palaiologos had with his marital policy. His only aim to contract Princess Laskarina's marriage with Yakov Svetoslav and the marriages of her two sisters was to get rid of the descendants of Theodore II Laskaris sending them as far away as possible so that they could not prevent him from usurping the throne. The second marriage which Michael Palaiologos realized – of his niece Maria and the tsar Konstantin Tih – had the purpose to guarantee, albeit for short time, that the Bulgarian tsardom would believe it beneficial to be in alliance with the Empire only until the basileus could find a reliable way to oppose to the danger coming from the coalition of Charles of Anjou. For that purpose Michael Palaiologos relied more on the negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church than on his relations with Bulgaria. The success of his talks with the Pope would deprive his great enemy the king of Naples of the serious support of the Papacy. The emperor had much more ambitious and long-term aim when he married his daughter Irina to a claimant to the throne in Bulgaria: he wanted to impose a protégé of his in Turnovo, and enjoy his loyalty and obedience for as long as possible. That is why the groom was chosen very carefully. The fourth marriage arranged by Michael Palaiologos – of Maria Asenina and Georgy Terter – had to strengthen the new tsar's position among the nobility in Turnovo. However, in the long run in spite of the serious preparation and diligent consideration of details, despite the initial success, it proved to be quite transient.

In a nutshell, during the period between 1185 and 1280 in their marital diplomacy regarding Byzantium the Bulgarians took more rarely the initiative to contract political marriages, but when they did use that means of diplomacy they tried to make the most of it by setting more essential goals; aiming at long lasting achievements,

and taking advantage of the arranged kinship ties more sagaciously and successfully. In contrast, the Romans and most of all Michael VIII Palaiologos used more often Byzantine princesses to solve political problems, but in most cases he had short-term goals and looked for provisional solutions. The only clearly evidenced attempt of Michael VIII Palaiologos to achieve long-lasting result with an interdynastic marriage failed.